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II
Analyzing the Impact of Three Histories of World War II:
Books by Bullock, Shirer, and Churchill
By Kevin Prendergast '10



*"The Second World War was an altogether different conflict, but the will to win was every bit as important – indeed it was more so. The contest was popularly perceived to be about issues of life and death for whole communities rather than for their fighting forces alone. They were issues, wrote one American observer in 1939, 'worth dying for' ... Half a century later the level of cruelty, destruction and sacrifice that it engendered is hard to comprehend, let alone recapture. Fifty years of security and prosperity have opened up a gulf between our own age and the age of the crisis and violence that propelled the world into war."*¹

I. The Second World War: An Introduction

It was a war that brought some twenty-five countries into full-scale armed conflict. It was a war that cost some sixty million lives in all, both military and civilian. No other war in world history has ever claimed as many human lives, cost as much, in terms of the amount of monetary destruction of infrastructure, or incited as much hatred and utter brutality as this war. There were countless battles and skirmishes taking place simultaneously all across the globe. World War II was also marked by genocide on a massive scale in a number of places, such as in the city of Nanking in China, or throughout Europe in German death camps.

For all of these reasons alike, it is important that people know what happened at these places and others in the bloodiest war known to mankind. There have been thousands of books published recounting the events of the Second World War. Some have been published by professional historians, documenting the major figures who helped shape the course of the war. One such example of this type is *Hitler: A Study in Tyranny* by the renowned British historian Alan Bullock. Some books that have been written about the war are memoirs, written by those who lived through various parts of the war. An example of this type is *Berlin Diary: The Journal of a Foreign Correspondent, 1934-1941* by William Shirer, who was an American CBS news correspondent who lived in Berlin, Germany during the rise of Adolf Hitler and his Nazi regime. One final type of book about the Second World War is a book written by a major

¹ Richard Overy, *Why the Allies Won* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995), 324-325.

figure from the World War II-era on the entire war. In this case, an example would be Winston Churchill's massive, six-volume history of the Second World War, bearing the same name. However, for the purposes of this paper, the book in particular that will be analyzed is the first of the six volumes, *The Gathering Storm*. While Churchill was not an academic or a professional historian, he devoted many years to creating a complete history of the war. Although he attempts to write the history as a detached historian, it still cannot be denied that he is writing about events which he helped shape. Nonetheless, the enormous six-volume history remains one of the most important works about the entire Second World War.

II. *Hitler: A Study in Tyranny*

When it was first published in 1952, Alan Bullock's biography of Hitler was one of the first epic biographies published of the man who headed Nazi Germany. Much of the information that helped Bullock write the book came out of the many different testimonies of the 1945-1946 Nuremberg Trials, in which major German leaders were tried as war criminals. Many of the German leaders placed much of the blame on Adolf Hitler for the atrocities that occurred under the regime. In the Preface to the Abridged Edition of his book, Bullock writes, the major question, "suggested by much that was said at the Nuremberg Trials, was to discover how great a part Hitler played in the history of the Third Reich and whether Göring and the other defendants were exaggerating when they claimed that under the Nazi regime the will of one man, and of one man alone, was decisive."² It baffled Bullock how one man, especially one of such modest roots as Adolf Hitler, could rise to power and become so influential, so controlling of so many aspects of German life. For this reason, Bullock identifies his goal as "to offer an account of one of the most puzzling and remarkable careers in modern history."³

As it did for so many others, Hitler's rise to power in Germany greatly intrigued Alan Bullock. To him, the most pressing question was: how could this happen? How could one man come to become so revered that he could influence so many people to do such disastrous, horrific and, in other cases, utterly absurd things? Bullock identifies that historians have come to understand Hitler in many different ways. Some view Hitler as a brilliant orator, capable of so greatly captivating his listeners that they would do anything for him. Others view Hitler as a mere pawn to German capitalist interest. Even more have come to contend that Hitler was merely a symbol of the restless ambitions of Germany to one day dominate Europe.⁴ However, Bullock counters that all of these analyses are merely overly-simplified views of Hitler or of the German nation.

Bullock understands that Hitler's rise occurred in the midst of a sweeping revolutionary time in Germany. It seems that it was almost a certainty that some politician at that time would feed off of the injustices of the 1919 Treaty of Versailles in an attempt to attain more power. For this reason, Bullock asserts that "Obviously, Nazism was a complex phenomenon to which many factors – social, economic, historical, psychological – contributed...It may be true that a mass movement, strongly nationalistic, anti-Semitic, and radical, would have sprung up in Germany without

² Alan Bullock, *Hitler: A Study in Tyranny*, Abridged Edition (New York: Harper Perennial Publishers, 1991), vii.

³ Bullock, *Hitler*, vii.

⁴ Bullock, *Hitler*, 485.

Hitler.” Thus, Bullock concedes that the time was ripe for Hitler to take power in Germany, because of the restlessness of the masses. People were so outraged at the failures of German leadership during the First World War. The economic hardships of the Great Depression and the hyperinflation which preceded it made daily life in Germany extremely miserable. Yet, as Bullock clearly identifies, “Hitler neither understood nor was interested in economics, but he was alive to the social and political consequences of events which affected the life of every family in Germany.”⁵ Thus, although Hitler had no real understanding of the science of economics and, quite frankly, no real interest in it, he understood how to capitalize on the plight of those who suffered during the Great Depression. This ability to understand the wants of the people around him allowed Hitler to use that knowledge to gain immense support from the disenfranchised.

Throughout the book, Bullock makes it clear that Adolf Hitler’s rise to power was the product of opportunism. He was incredibly skilled at preying on the wants and needs of the lower class people in Germany. As Bullock writes, “Hitler was the greatest demagogue in history. Those who add ‘only a demagogue’ fail to appreciate the nature of political power in an age of mass politics. As he himself said: ‘To be a leader, means to be able to move masses.’”⁶ Hitler was an excellent orator who was able to rouse a crowd like few others could ever do. The Nazi party in Germany was one that began in bars and warehouses, but was able to gain incredible support through the work of Hitler and others, such as Joseph Goebbels, who led the propaganda machine of the Nazi party. It was Hitler’s ability to spark the passions of thousands of crowds throughout his political career that turned the Nazi party into the controlling force that it was throughout World War II. Yet, as Bullock states, “The Nazi campaign could not have succeeded as it did by the ingenuity of its methods alone, if it had not at the same time corresponded and appealed to the mood of a considerable proportion of the German people.”⁷

Hitler was a master of building power by preying on the wants and needs of the working class. His masterful oratory skills made him into a major force in German politics even when many of the members of the German government did not like him. However, once the Nazi party headed the German government, it was their tactics of power politics that allowed them to suppress all opposition as well as they did. Hitler conveyed these right-wing totalitarian ideas ever since he was a young man living in Vienna. For instance, as Bullock writes, “Hitler reached the conclusion that: ‘the psyche of the broad masses is accessible only to what is strong and uncompromising... The masses of the people prefer the ruler to the suppliant and are filled with a stronger sense of mental security by a teaching that brooks no rival than by a teaching which offers them a liberal choice.’”⁸ In this way, it seems quite evident that Hitler always had an inclination to the sort of totalitarian policies which he employed while he was in power. He saw no benefit in providing the masses with free speech or varying ideas on an issue. Rather, he thought that society actually benefitted from being told what to think by a strong leader. Further, as Bullock writes, “Hitler had no use for any democratic

⁵ Bullock, *Hitler*, 77.

⁶ Bullock, *Hitler*, 37.

⁷ Bullock, *Hitler*, 115.

⁸ Bullock, *Hitler*, 18.

institution: free speech, free press, or parliament.”⁹ For, in Hitler’s own words, “The majority represents not only ignorance but cowardice...The majority can never replace the man.”¹⁰

This is the essence of what Bullock contends made Hitler into the incredibly powerful figure which he became. While he was an up-and-coming younger politician in Germany, he preyed on the restless sentiments of the masses, who were feeling wronged by the Treaty of Versailles and by the German government’s ineffective economic policies. He used his excellent oratory skills and persuasiveness, combined with Goebbels’ extremely effective propaganda, to build a major movement in the German political landscape. He used the system to attain power, then changed the system to fit his wants once he had power. As Bullock writes, in doing the things he did, “Hitler never abandoned the cloak of legality; instead he turned the law inside out and made illegality legal.”¹¹ Thus, while it is possible that another leader could have achieved power in a similar way in Germany, it is doubtful that few could have achieved the devastating results that Adolf Hitler did.

III. *Berlin Diary: The Journal of a Foreign Correspondent, 1934-1941*

William L. Shirer’s *Berlin Diary* provides a very important American perspective to Hitler’s rise to power from someone who lived in Berlin during the time period. It is interesting, however, that this book is not the one that made Shirer most famous. Despite its importance because of the fact that Shirer was writing a firsthand account of Hitler’s rise to power, Shirer’s book entitled *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* is actually the book for which most people know Shirer. *Berlin Diary* is also particularly relevant because, while many of Shirer’s writings come from his time in Berlin, there are certain periods in which Shirer travels to other major cities throughout Europe, such as London, Vienna, Warsaw, and others. Thus, he is able to provide another interesting perspective on Hitler’s rise in Germany.

It is also worth noting that the book, *Berlin Diary*, was published around the time that the United States entered the war in 1941. Thus, its importance as a way for many living at the time to understand what happened to get the world tossed into such a war is something that should be remembered as well. The reason why Shirer decided to leave is because the German government placed increasing pressure on Shirer to report the official Nazi state-issued news reports and not his own personal ideas and opinions on what was happening in Germany. For this reason, Shirer became more and more concerned about not only his ability to report the accurate news, but for his own personal safety as well. For this reason, the diary comes to an end on December 13, 1940, with Shirer writing aboard a ship bound for the United States. He reflects on his time in Europe by writing, “I had spent all fifteen of my adult years [in Europe]...they had been happy years, personally, and for all people in Europe they had had meaning and borne hope until the war came and the Nazi blight and the hatred and the fraud and the political gangsterism and the murder and the massacre and the incredible intolerance and all the

⁹ Bullock, *Hitler*, 16.

¹⁰ Bullock, *Hitler*, 16.

¹¹ Bullock, *Hitler*, 141.

suffering...¹². This passage is a good representative of many of the incredibly cruel things that Shirer witnessed over the course of his seven years in Berlin during the Nazi rise.

Shirer was also able to shed light on many other aspects of Nazi life during his seven years stationed in Berlin. For instance, he writes at length on how he perceived Adolf Hitler and his rise in Germany. On September 5, 1934, very early in the diary, he writes, “every word dropped by Hitler seemed like an inspired Word from on high. Man’s – or at least the German’s – critical faculty is swept away at such moments, and every lie pronounced is accepted as high truth itself.”¹³ This account seems to convey the same ideas as presented by Alan Bullock regarding Hitler’s incredible power of oratory and his ability to arouse a crowd in unity with the utmost ease. Also similar to the ideas presented by Bullock is the idea that these seemingly fanatical ideas were not Hitler’s alone. Rather, as Shirer writes, “It must also be noted down that Hitler’s frenzy for bloody conquest is by no means exclusive to him in Germany.”¹⁴ Shirer was absolutely appalled at some of the outlandish comments made by people in Germany at this time. He could not believe some of the things people were believing. For instance, “As to the proclamation, it contained such statements as these, all wildly applauded as if they were new truths: ‘The German form of life is definitely determined for the next thousand years... There will be no revolution in Germany for the next one thousand years!’”¹⁵.

Shirer also reported on the interactions between Hitler and other world leaders and was even able to see Hitler making speeches in front of the Reichstag early on in his time in Germany. One report, made in the days before the Munich Pact was agreed upon in 1938, states that “Hitler has demanded that Czechoslovakia not later than Saturday, October 1, agree to the handing over of Sudetenland to Germany...[yet] the German people I talked with in the streets of Cologne this morning, and in Berlin this evening, believe there’ll be peace.”¹⁶ Two days later, Shirer witnessed a speech made by Hitler in front of some fifteen thousand Nazi party members regarding the impending crisis. Shirer recorded, “Curious audience, the fifteen thousand party *Bonzen* packed the hall. They applauded his words with usual enthusiasm... Twice Hitler screamed that *this* is absolutely his last territorial demand in Europe.”¹⁷ It is simply incredible to read some of these vivid firsthand accounts of some of the most important events of the Second World War. It is for this reason, among others, that Shirer’s work still remains an important piece of the history of the war.

Not only did Shirer attend many major Nazi party gatherings as a reporter, but he was able to attain other information from Germans during this time as well. Naturally, because Shirer’s book was published during the war, many of his informants are not mentioned by name. On September 21, 1940, a man to whom Shirer refers as X, told Shirer a “weird story”¹⁸. After disconnecting the telephone and ensuring that no one was listening through the crack of the door, X proceeded to tell Shirer that “the Gestapo is

¹² William L. Shirer, *Berlin Diary: The Journal of a Foreign Correspondent, 1934-1941*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Publishers, 1941), 605.

¹³ Shirer, *Berlin Diary*, 19.

¹⁴ Shirer, *Berlin Diary*, 585.

¹⁵ Shirer, *Berlin Diary*, 19.

¹⁶ Shirer, *Berlin Diary*, 140.

¹⁷ Shirer, *Berlin Diary*, 141.

¹⁸ Shirer, *Berlin Diary*, 512.

now systematically bumping off the mentally deficient people of the Reich. The Nazis call them 'mercy deaths.'"¹⁹ A few months later, on November 25, 1940, Shirer adds more details to the gruesome story, writing, "I have at last got to the bottom of these 'mercy killings.' It's an evil tale. The Gestapo, with the knowledge and approval of the German government, is systematically putting to death the mentally deficient population of the Reich...A conservative and trustworthy German tells me he estimates the number at a hundred thousand. I think that figure is too high."²⁰ Thus, it is evident that, although Shirer lived in Berlin for nearly seven years and witnessed so many eye-opening things in Nazi Germany, he still could not fathom the atrocities that had occurred and would continue to occur under Adolf Hitler.

IV. *The Gathering Storm*

Winston Churchill's *The Second World War* still remains one of the most definitive histories on the war. It was written in six volumes, published over six years, and contains thousands of pages of information about the war. The masterpiece even helped earn Winston Churchill the 1953 Nobel Prize in Literature. In the Presentation Speech made when Churchill accepted his award, the presenting member of the Swedish Academy stated, "Very seldom have great statesmen and warriors also been great writers...Churchill's political and literary achievements are of such magnitude that one is tempted to resort to portray him as a Caesar who also has the gift of Cicero's pen...With all due respects to archives and documents, there is something special about history written by a man who has himself helped to make it."²¹

Much of Churchill's first volume, *The Gathering Storm*, which regards the period from 1919 through May 10, 1940, is dedicated to portraying how the Second World War was very much a war that could have easily been stopped. For instance, he explicitly writes in the preface to *The Gathering Storm*, "One day President Roosevelt told me that he was asking publicly for suggestions about what the war should be called. I said at once 'The Unnecessary War.' There never was a war more easy to stop than that which has just wrecked what was left of the world from the previous struggle."²² Churchill contends that if European leaders had not been so quick to appease Hitler on numerous occasions that the problem could have been resolved in a much easier way than it was. If Europe had cared to notice Hitler's rise to power, it would have been a much easier problem to solve. However, as he writes, "The ceaseless struggles and gradual emergence of Adolf Hitler as a national figure were little noticed by the victors."²³ Churchill is also quite critical of the victors of the First World War for their harsh treatment of Germany at the Versailles Conference, calling the treaty and subsequent actions taken toward Germany "The Follies of the Victors."²⁴

There were numerous other occasions on which Hitler could have easily been stopped. Regarding the German breach of the Versailles Treaty through armed build-up, Churchill wrote, "The United States had washed their hands of all concern with Europe,

¹⁹ Shirer, *Berlin Diary*, 512.

²⁰ Shirer, *Berlin Diary*, 569.

²¹ S. Siwertz, "Presentation Speech for The Nobel Prize in Literature 1953," The Nobel Foundation, http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1953/press.html.

²² Winston Churchill, *The Gathering Storm*, (New York: The Houghton Mifflin Company, 1986), vii-viii.

²³ Churchill, *The Gathering Storm*, 27.

²⁴ Churchill, *The Gathering Storm*, 3-13.

apart from wishing well to everybody, and were sure they would never have to be bothered with it again. But France, Great Britain, and also – decidedly – Italy...felt bound to challenge this definite act of treaty-violation by Hitler.”²⁵ Thus, he sees it as a mistake by the United States to turn to isolationist policies after the First World War. Also, as he notes, much of Europe was too bogged down in its own affairs to worry about German problems. However, he conveys the cause of his own country as well as Italy and France as a noble one, in which few cared to join.

One other instance of which Churchill writes at length is the debate over the Sudetenland and the subsequent Munich Conference, which he deems “The Tragedy of Munich.”²⁶ Churchill finds this to be very much a turning point in the growing conflict with Germany. After the appeasement of Hitler, Churchill recognizes that a number of major European nations began to deem it necessary to build up their military, as the concern over another war began to mount. As Churchill writes, “After the sense of relief springing from the Munich agreement had worn off Mr. Chamberlain and his government found themselves confronted by a sharp dilemma. The Prime Minister had said, ‘I believe it is peace for our time.’ But the majority of his colleagues wished to utilise ‘our time’ to rearm as rapidly as possible.”²⁷ Thus, it is evident that, although many hoped the Munich Pact would bring peace, many European leaders were not entirely blind to the growing political and military aspirations of Adolf Hitler and the rest of Nazi Germany. However, this major mistake had been made and, just as many armies began to grow throughout Europe, Hitler’s did as well. And, the rest of the story, which comes to fill thousands more pages in Churchill’s six volume work, as they say, is history.

V. Conclusion

All of these three books differ in their style. All of these three books are written by different people with different perspectives – one a professional historian, one a news correspondent, and another a major player in the events of the war. Yet, all three of these works are immensely valuable and remain to be so. They all serve to make future generations aware of the seemingly unfathomable events that took place from 1933-1945. As Churchill writes in the preface to *The Gathering Storm*, “It is my earnest hope that pondering upon the past may give guidance in days to come, enable a new generation to repair some of the errors of former years, and thus govern, in accordance with the needs and glory of man, the awful unfolding scene of the future.”²⁸ This is how these three books, very different in both their perspective and content, all serve a very similar purpose – to educate those who were not able, thankfully, to witness some of the unspeakable atrocities of this horrific war. Thus, hopefully, by learning about the past through works such as these three, one would hope that future generations can use the lessons learned out of this war to create a much better future for both themselves and their children.

²⁵ Churchill, *The Gathering Storm*, 63.

²⁶ Churchill, *The Gathering Storm*, 131-139.

²⁷ Churchill, *The Gathering Storm*, 140.

²⁸ Churchill, *The Gathering Storm*, viii.

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